

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

ENGAGING OLDER WORKERS: ADVICE FOR YOUNGER MANAGERS

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

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THE GOAL:

Maximize the productivity and performance of older workers.

NANO TOOL:

Older workers (defined in the United States as 55+) are a rapidly growing segment of the workforce, and research shows that their job performance is superior in nearly every aspect than that of younger cohorts. They offer the “just in time” skills employers say they want, and are willing to work the flexible schedules modern businesses require.

Yet this older work force poses a unique challenge for younger supervisors: they have difficulty handling subordinates who have more experience than they do. This challenge translates into management problems as well as a resistance to hiring older workers. The goal is to develop a new way to manage older workers that eliminates these challenges.

ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Recognize the problem:** Supervisors must understand that more experienced subordinates may have a problem being supervised by someone with less experience, and it is not credible to manage such employees with a dictatorial (“because I said so” or “because I know better”) approach.
- 2. Acknowledge the expertise of older subordinates:** Don’t assume. The supervisor should be direct, saying, “I know you have a lot of experience in this area, and we want to use that experience.”
- 3. Engage older subordinates in defining and solving problems:** Ask them to review the pro’s and con’s of potential decisions, or to anticipate likely scenarios when you’re dealing with uncertain situations. They are likely to respond with unique ideas and perspectives that can help reduce the potential risks.
- 4. Overcome biases in supervision:** Younger supervisors tend to give lower appraisals to older subordinates independent of the quality of their work. They also are less likely to recognize when training would improve the performance of older as compared to younger subordinates. Knowing these natural (often unconscious) biases can help younger leaders be fairer in their management practices.
- 5. Manage follow-up:** Experienced subordinates still need to be managed, yet evidence suggests that younger supervisors are reluctant to do so. Supervisors should *actively plan* to provide praise and constructive feedback. Set goals collaboratively and plan for regular evaluations. Acknowledge that everyone appreciates praise, and everyone must be held accountable when performance is substandard.



HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT:

- The military, and especially the Marine Corps, have long recognized the challenges of having younger officers in charge of older, more experienced enlisted troops. They know that, even in their highly regimented environment, “command and control” does not work. The Marines tell their new Lieutenants to form a partnership with their Sergeants and work together to make decisions. This partnership approach also works well with older workers in the business world.
- Leading companies in Singapore offer training programs to help manage the expectations of older workers (you have to take orders) and younger subordinates (you have to manage differently). Knowing the expectations, opportunities, and pitfalls can make a major difference in the success rates of the new hires.
- Companies such as Pitney Bowes, who recognize older workers’ experience and higher productivity, are taking advantage by targeting their hiring at them. Today, their average new hire is 55 years old.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Managing the Older Worker: How to Prepare for the New Organizational Order*. Peter Cappelli and William Novelli (Harvard Business Review Press, 2010). Shares management practices for attracting, retaining, and engaging older employees.
- “Engaging Your Older Workers,” Peter Cappelli (*Harvard Business Review*, November 4, 2014). Focuses on methods for keeping the fastest-growing segment of the workforce engaged.
- Peter Cappelli teaches in [Wharton’s Essentials of Management](#) Program.

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director is Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton’s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.